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*Pars pro toto: film interpretation according to the documentary method*¹

Astrid Baltruschat²

ABSTRACT

Using the example of a short film shot by students, insights are provided as to how films can be interpreted on the basis of the documentary method. It is shown that the film's meaning, which the documentary method aims to explore, can be found as a homologous structure in different filmic dimensions. It permeates the document both in the individual fragment and as a whole in the sense of "pars pro toto." The study's interpretive results are characterized and validated by the homologies identified in the analysis.

KEYWORDS

Visual sociology; School; Documentary method; Video analysis

Pars pro toto: a interpretação de filmes de acordo com o método documentário

RESUMO

Usando o exemplo de um trecho de filme feito por estudantes, o texto propicia insights de como os filmes podem ser interpretados segundo o método documentário. Mostra que o sentido do filme, o qual o método documentário visa explorar, pode ser encontrado como uma estrutura homóloga em diferentes dimensões fílmicas. Ele permeia o documento tanto no nível de cada fragmento quanto em sua totalidade no sentido de "pars pro toto." Os resultados da interpretação são caracterizados e validados pelas homologias identificadas na análise.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Sociologia visual; Escola; Método documentário; Análise de vídeo

¹ This article was translated by Claudia Nitzschmann.

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The short film used in this study, *Melanchthon – find ich super* (Engl.: “Melanchthon – I like it”), resulted from a creative competition that focused on the theme of “*Schule überdenken! – Muss die Institution Schule grundlegend verändert werden?*” (Engl.: “Rethinking school! – Does school as an institution have to be fundamentally changed?”).³ It was shot by a group of students who not only produced the film but also played the lead roles.

Before the film is considered as a whole, an individual film fragment is first given priority. It is a so-called “*Fokussierungsmetapher*” (Engl.: “focusing metaphor”) (BOHNSACK, 2003, p. 138; BOHNSACK, 2009, p. 215), in which central themes of the film appear in compressed form and in an extremely confined space. In this short scene, we first only look at the filmic image (Figure 1) and, in particular, only examine one representative photogram (Figure 2). Any prior knowledge regarding this scene, in the context of the whole film and the tonal space (the acoustic dimension) of the film, is initially left aside. It would contain information concerning the film’s iconographic dimension of meaning by providing information about the ‘story’ in which this scene is embedded, the roles played by the actors, and what they are negotiating. Since the documentary method is not aimed at the WHAT (i.e., at that which is explicitly addressed) but rather at the HOW (i.e., at how that which is elaborated is addressed), it intentionally explores beyond the iconographic meanings and begins with the analysis on the so-called pre-iconographic level. (BOHNSACK, 2003; 2009) This results in a violation of common sense because images and movies are usually examined in an attempt to identify story lines or plots. (BOHNSACK, 2005, p. 253) Instead, the “*entgegenkommender Sinn*” (Engl.: “obvious meaning”), (BARTHES, 1990) which immediately imposes itself on the observer is consciously abandoned.

³ For further information about the competition and the film see Baltruschat 2010a. The film and its transcript can be found at www.moviscript.net.



FIGURE 1 – Transcript of the ‘Interview’ scene

A young woman is in a hallway of a large building. Her head and a part of her upper body are visible. While the camera is moving towards her, a pink microphone enters the frame from the bottom left. What is seen of the person changes so that finally only her head and neck are visible, everything else is off camera.



FIGURE 2 – Photogram from the ‘Interview’ scene

From the gestures one can infer that the actress is speaking into the microphone, but her facial features are hardly visible. Due to the lighting conditions (backlit shot) her face remains largely obscure while the hallway in which she is standing is brightly lit and clearly visible. This way, the background of the image becomes the foreground and the foreground, as it were, becomes the background. Because of the scenic design (i.e., the microphone moving in on her), the head of the young woman is *highlighted* while at the same time *attention is taken away from her* and focused to the hallway by means of lighting and perspective (Figure 3), so that the setting in which the scene takes place dominates. The evenly positioned images in the background give the institution-like hallway a feel of uniformity.

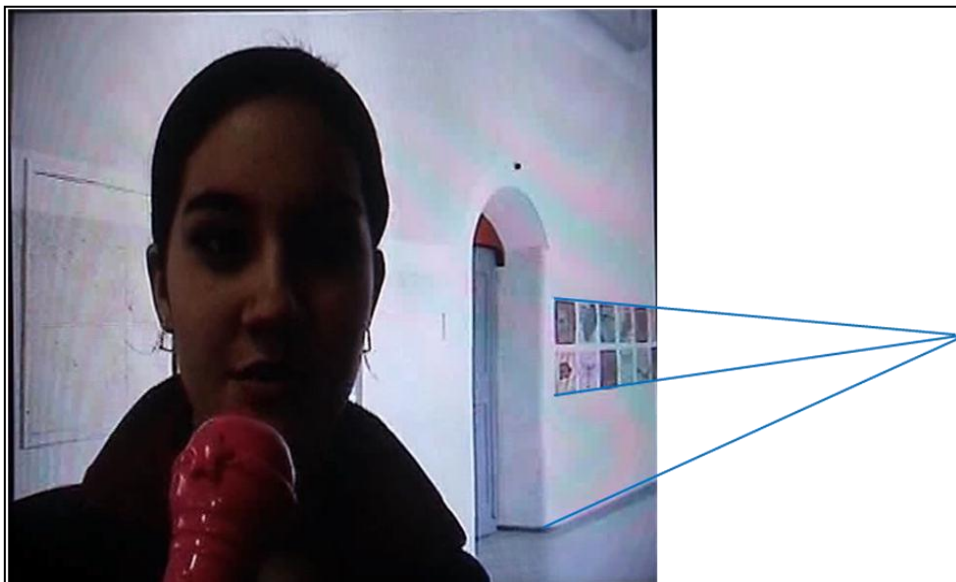


FIGURE 3 – Photogram from the ‘Interview’ scene – perspective

The inconsistency just outlined is also evident when looking at the head itself. On one hand, by showing the face, the *unique*, personal identification feature of this person is brought into the picture; on the other hand it is filmed in such a way that the uniqueness is lost, and with the dark silhouette an *exchangeable* form moves into the center of attention. This ambivalence is visible also in the way the head is positioned, as it consumes the space in the foreground, yet is neither centered nor follows the golden ratio, and therefore appears somewhat incongruous.



FIGURE 4 – Photogram from the ‘Interview’ scene – planimetrics 1

With respect to planimetrics, i.e., the structuring of the image area, the microphone is focused, while the foreground and background of the image remain entirely unconnected.

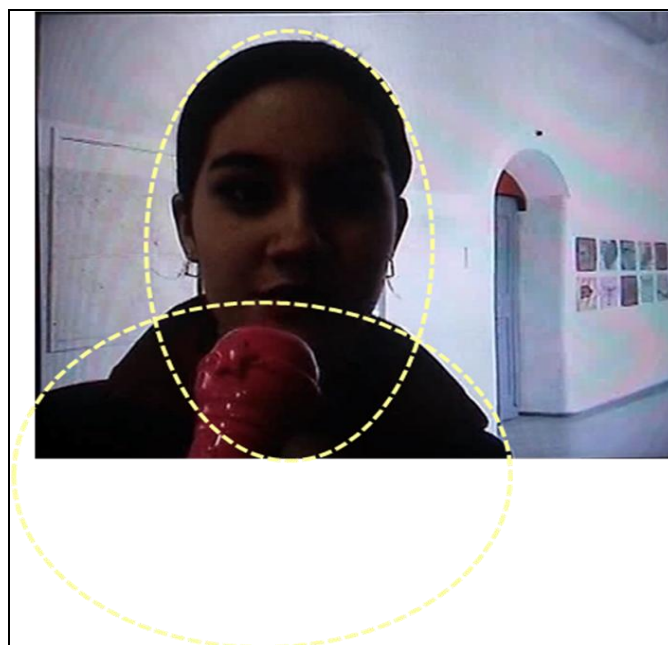


FIGURE 5 – Photogram from the ‘Interview’ scene – planimetrics 2

The microphone, directed at the face as an identity creating characteristic of an individual, gives reason to expect a *personal* contribution (possibly a personal experience or personal opinion), while the overall composition gives the appearance of an ultimately *impersonal* pose⁴ – a pose, as it were, of a (supposedly) ‘personal’ opinion.

If one includes the text, one sees that it also reflects this ‘personal’ pose.

TC:	2:10		2:11		2:12		2:13	
								
Kamera:		↑	↑	↑				
Off:			Wie findest	d u d i e	SMV ?			
S:						Also ich find	es ist eine	t o l l e
TC:	2:14		2:15		2:16		2:17	
								
S:	I d e e ,	w e i l	f r ü h e r	h a t t e n	die Schüler	überhaupt	n i c h t s	z u s a g e n
TC:	2:18		2:19		2:20		2:21	
								
Off:							Dankeschön!	
S:	u n d h e u t e	g i b t e s	s o g a r s c h o n	e i n e	Schülermit -	verwaltung.		

FIGURE 6 – Transcript of the ‘Interview’ scene with text

„Wie findest Du die SMV⁵?“

„Also ich find es ist eine tolle Idee, weil früher hatten die Schüler überhaupt nichts zu sagen und heute gibt es sogar schon eine Schülermitverwaltung.“

„Dankeschön!“

“What is your opinion about the student council?”

“Well, I think it is a great idea, because students didn’t have any say before and today there is even a student council.”

“Thank you!”

⁴ Imdahl distinguishes between a “Pose” and a “Gebärde” (Engl.: “Gesture”) as follows: “A gesture is carried out by oneself to express something of oneself or even oneself. A gesture is self-expression through body language, a pose, however, is an expression of the foreign. A pose is imposed, it depersonalizes, it deindividualizes the person who performs it. The pose is a false, in a sense unreal exceptional situation, it is self-manipulation or manipulation by another.” (IMDAHL, 1996a, p. 575). For better understandability and readability of the text all quotes in this text have been translated from the original German. All references refer to the German original.

⁵ The institutionalization of the student council aimed at offering students opportunities for participation and responsible co-determination. The student council is composed of student representatives elected by the students.

The prosody (the speech melody) of the question, “*Wie findest Du die SMV?*” (Engl.: “What is your opinion about the student council?”), reflects a command since the voice is not raised at the end of the sentence as is common for a question in German. The speed and fluidity of the response shows that it is not given spontaneously and without preparation. The student council is referred to as an “idea” and thus characterized as a theoretical construct. Even the response’s comparison with the then (“*früher hatten*” (“before”)) does not establish this institution as real. It does not say “Before the students did not have a say but today they do.” Instead, the point of comparison is shifted and the comparison is continued on another level to “*heute gibt es ... eine SMV,*” (Engl.: “today there is a student council”). The possibility of participation is not discussed, but only the existence of a formal institution.

This reduction to the purely formal aspect of an institution was already reflected in the immediately preceding scene in which the student council was introduced (Figure 7). There the student council was represented by a bulletin board, which was even referred to as the student council (“*Das ist unsere SMV ...*”,Engl.: “This is our student council ...”).







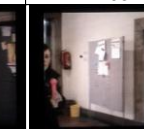
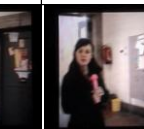






TC:	2:00		2:01		2:02		2:03	
								
Kamera:	↑	↑				→	←	
S:			D a s i s t	u n s e r e	S M V :		D i e	S c h ü l e r -
TC:	2:04		2:05		2:06		2:07	
								
Kamera:							→	→
S:	M i t v e r -	w a l t u n g ,	u n d d i e w i r d	v o n u n s e r e n	d r e i S c h ü l e r -	s p r e c h e r n	r e g i e r t .	

FIGURE 7 – Transcript of the bulletin board scene

“Das ist unsere SMV, die Schülermitverwaltung, und die wird von unseren drei Schülersprechern regiert.”
“This is our student council, which is governed by our three student representatives.”

In Figure 6, the connection to a personal opinion of the student council is established by the introduction (*“Wie findest Du ...?”* – *“Also ich finde ...”*, Engl.: *“What is your opinion ...?”* – *“Well I think ...”*). However, this contribution neither represents a spontaneous personal statement nor does one learn something about the mode of operation of the student council. Only the positive response of *“toll”* (Engl.: *“great”*) appears important, the credibility of which is underlined by the as-if of a personal opinion.

The transcontrariness of this seemingly personal impersonality reveals a homology between image and text in this scene, which validates and underlines the meaning already visible in the pictorial.

By appearing to spontaneously express an opinion in the ‘Interview’ scene, which in reality is staged, the option of freely expressing oneself is undermined. Instead of a self-determined contribution, the aspiration to communicate that which is desired (by others) is expressed. In this case, this aspiration not only applies to saying what is desired, but also to expressing oneself *personally*.

This emphasis is confirmed when one considers the movie as a whole. Already its title hints at a personal opinion: *“Melanchthon⁶ – find ich super”* (Engl.: *“Melanchthon – I like it”*). The expression *“x – find ich super”* (Engl.: *“x – I like it”*), which is used here, is a well-known phrase in Germany, which originated from an advertising slogan of the renowned mail-order company, Otto. (*“Otto – find ich gut,”* Engl.: *“Otto – I like it”*). The use of this phrase allows the voicing of a ‘personal’ opinion (*“find ich,”* Engl.: *“in my opinion”*) while still dealing in clichés. Therefore, even the title of the film reflects the as-if of a personal position.

⁶ The name Melanchthon refers to the school the producers attend, the “Melanchthon-Gymnasium.”
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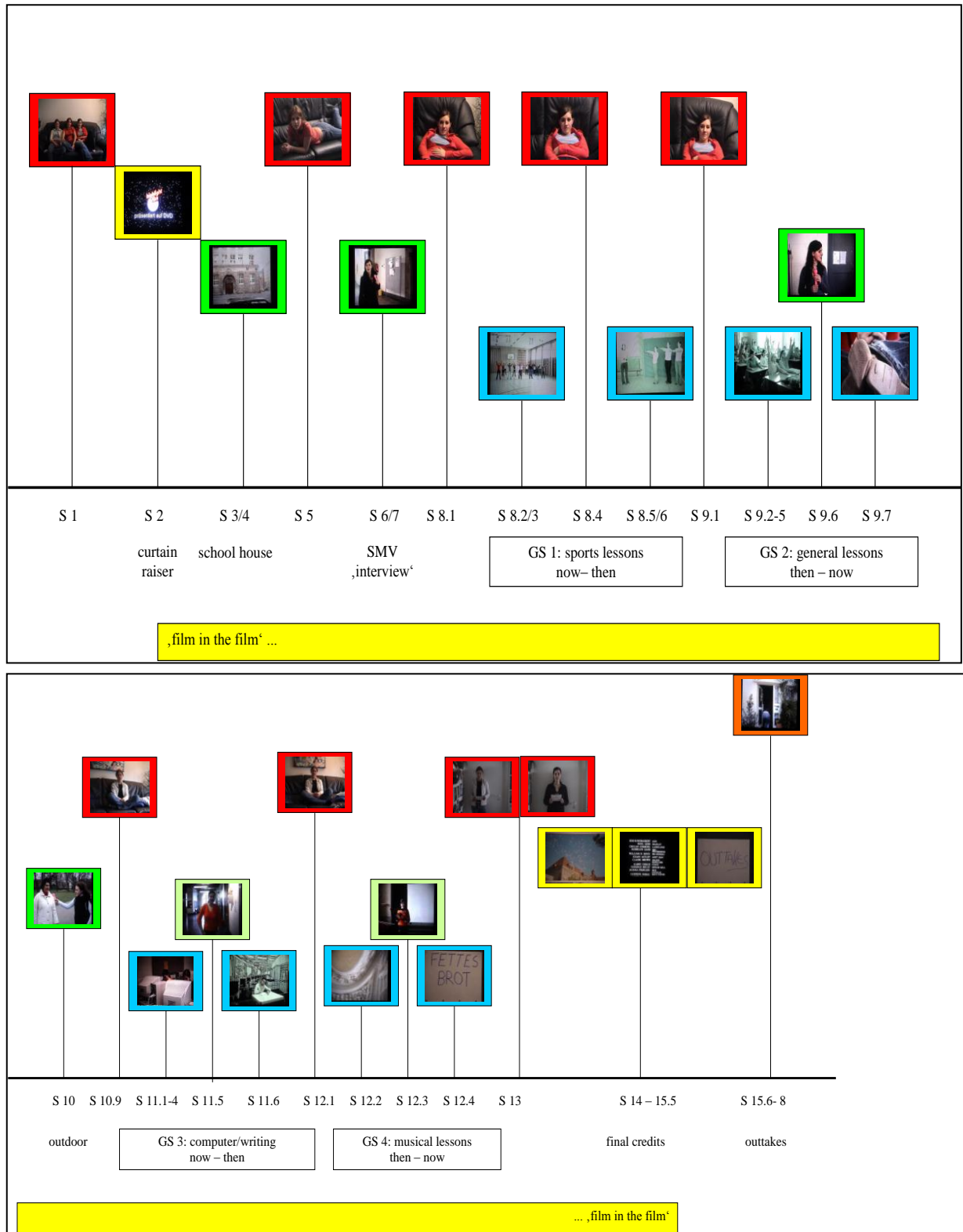


FIGURE 8 – Structural sketch of the film

The film is initially opened by the three producers (S1 in Figure 8). Subsequently they introduce their school building, the Melanchthon-Gymnasium (S 3/4), and the student council (S 6/7). The main part of the film consists of a comparison between school in the past and in the present (GS 1–4). For this, two scenes are always contrasted – one about the *Then* and one about the *Now* – between which one of the film producers announces, comments or links the scenes as a presenter (red frames; setting: sofa). Altogether there are four pairs of scenes (blue frames): the first one about physical education (GS 1), the second about lessons in general (GS 2), the third about writing (GS 3), and the fourth about music lessons (GS 4). A longer section in the middle of the film takes place outdoors in a park where the producers interview other people about their experience with school (S 10).

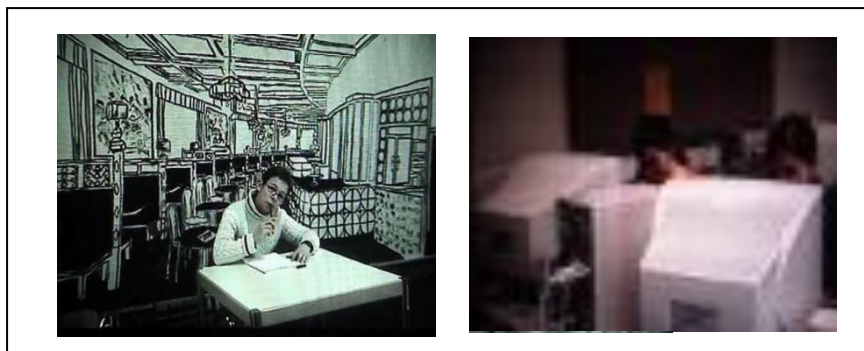
**(a)****(b)****(c)****(d)****FIGURE 9 a-d** – Comparison of photograms related to the interviews

When compared with the other interviews in this film, the artificial character of the aforementioned ‘interview’ scene (the only one that takes place in the school) is even more pronounced than before. For this ‘interview’, one of the producers plays the role of a student who recites the text written by the production team. It is interesting to note that the

producer being interviewed does not voice her ‘personal’ opinion about the student council as a presenter – i.e., from the perspective of the role played by her in the rest of the film – but that she takes the role of a student. She thus does not speak for herself but as a student, thereby avoiding a personal statement. She complies with the expectation to express a personal opinion and at the same time is able to leave out her personal identity. This distancing between the claim to her personality and her real personality remains very discreet, since the expectation is fulfilled superficially. Here, very skillful juggling between identification and distancing can be observed, suggesting the everyday occurrence of such interactions and revealing habitualized handling of the ‘as-if game.’

The school’s claim to the individual personalities of the students, as well as the students’ withdrawal or distancing from this claim, becomes visible in many ways throughout the film and across different filmic dimensions. Keeping in mind the embedded scenes on the sofa (red frames), a look at the overall structure of the film (Figure 8) reveals a constant switch between a personal sphere, which is introduced by the settings of private rooms (sofa, door), and the sphere of the school.

**(a)****(b)**



(c)



(d)

FIGURE 10 a-d – Photograms related to the contrasting scenes of *Now* and *Then* (GS 1–4)

If one looks at the comparisons of school now and then, one can also observe a retreat from immediate visibility by which the *Now* scenes set themselves apart from the *Then*. While the people in the *Then* are clearly visible, the people in the *Now* disappear in the background (Figure 10a), behind large-scale apparatuses (Figure 10b) or signs (Figure 10d), or have their bodies filmed in parts rather than the whole (Abb. 10c). The students who produced the film thus display an obvious desire for increased visibility⁷ in everyday school life, which is channeled into the film's rejection of total visibility (BALTRUSCHAT, 2010a; 2010b; 2010c).

The one-sided visibility (cf. footnote 6) of those obligated to voice a personal opinion is also apparent in a comparison of the interviews. In the interviews at the park (S 10), both parties enter into communication equitably and voluntarily. As a manifestation of this symmetry, both parties are represented equally in the picture (Figure 9a and b). The one-sided

⁷ The asymmetry in the way in which the parties are obligated to be visible is a typical feature of interactions structured by power. While the superior part can determine how much he wants to reveal about himself, the inferior one is obligated to an increased level of visibility (FOUCAULT, 1977, p. 221; BOHNSACK, 1983; BALTRUSCHAT, 2010a, p. 152).

focus on the one who cannot resist the claim to his personhood, however, is ironically taken to the extreme outdoors – away from the school (Figure 9c). On closer inspection of the two scenes, ‘Interview’ and ‘Baby’, a common basic structure is revealed, though greatly exaggerated in the ‘Baby’ scene (BALTRUSCHAT, 2010 a). By virtue of its framing as a joke, this revealing caricature remains very discreet, so that the skillful juxtaposition of loyalty and distancing also becomes visible here.

Finally, at the end of the film, the producers distance themselves from the intrusive focus on themselves. In the outtakes that immediately follow the movie, (Figure 8: S 15.5–8) they playfully fend off the curious gaze of a hidden camera that makes them ‘actors against their will.’ By interrupting the film's fiction⁸, the producers – contrary to usual filmic conventions – reveal the preceding scenes as “only” a film, i.e., as acting. Their film, and therefore their personal contribution to the subject of school via this film, is thus identified as merely an official statement. At the same time, they remain within the context of filmic convention by using the established form of outtakes and therefore the fundamental loyalty is not completely abandoned despite the distancing effect.⁹

Already the frame of the short ‘Interview’ scene introduced in the beginning (Figure 1 and 2) revealed the pose of *personal* commitment. It was validated and substantiated through the addition of the tonal space as well as by looking at the overall structure of the film, its title, and other scenes used for comparison. This revealed the expectation of authentic self-expression that the producers obviously feel confronted with, and which they subsequently deal with. In their skillful interaction with the as-if, in which they meet this expectation yet at the same time avoid personal encroachment, an essential pattern of the producers' orientation throughout the film becomes visible. It is present both in the smallest fragments, such as a photogram, and the overall structure of the film as a whole. And so it is evident from this example that in view of the documentary meaning of a film, the whole is already present in the individual parts of the whole. (IMDAHL 1996b, p. 23; BOHNSACK, 2009, p. 169) This represents the idea of “pars pro toto.”

⁸ The fiction of a motion picture usually remains uninterrupted. Only in surreal or humorous films is the reality behind the scenes disclosed and the film thereby revealed as a spectacle. Accordingly, outtakes are usually not attached directly to the film but included as separate bonus material.

⁹ The successful detachment of the students can also be seen in the framing at the beginning of the film. Following the opening scene on the sofa (Figure 8, p. 1) they introduce a sort of ‘film within the film’ (yellow bar in Fig. 8, the film about school) with the words “*Film ab!*” (Engl.: “Action!”). The subsequent use of opening credits foreign to the film (S 2) reveals a variation of their distancing (BALTRUSCHAT, 2010 a, b, c).

Even though a film is much more than a series of still images, essential features of its “*Wesenssinn*” (Engl.: “characteristic meaning”) or “*Dokumentsinn*” (Engl.: “document meaning”) can nevertheless be reflected in an individual image (PANOFSKY, 1932, p. 118; 115). However, in order to reconstruct, validate, and specify it, it is necessary to carefully take into account other parts of different filmic dimensions and the film in its entirety. In addition to the photogram, such parts can also consist of a gesture or an installation (BALTRUSCHAT a, b, c). In principle, any element of a film could be subjected to a detailed analysis as part of the whole. However, it is recommended to select particularly those fragments that are characterized by a concentration of meaning, or in which specific features such as ruptures or contradictions are expressed. By virtue of their “*Sinnkomplexität des Übergegensätzlichen*” (Engl.: “complexity of meaning characterized by transcontrariness”) (IMDAHL, 1996b, p. 107), such elements – in the documentary method they are referred to as “*Fokussierungsmetaphern*” (Engl.: “focusing metaphors”) – provide access in a special way to the producers’ realm of experience (BOHNSACK, 2009, p. 36).

In this article, only *one* single element was initially selected as a starting point to show that the whole is reflected in the part. This approach is not consistent with the practical research process of interpretation. This process is neither ideal in any way nor linear, but rather contingent and circular, just as in other hermeneutic methods¹⁰. It is characterized by constant comparison between individual focusing metaphors and the overall structure. Again and again, individual parts are related to each other or the whole until the documentary meaning of the whole gradually becomes clear.

¹⁰ This is not to imply that recommended sequences of steps for film interpretation (BALTRUSCHAT, 2010 a, b, c; BOHNSACK 2009; BOHNSACK; BALTRUSCHAT 2010) cannot provide some guidance.

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